

ARIZONA VETERANS' SERVICE ADVISORY COMMISSION
Our Lady of the Valley Catholic Church, 505 N. La Canada
Green Valley, AZ 85614

Saturday, January 20, 2007

MINUTES

Call to Order – The meeting was called to order at 10:05 a.m. by Chairman Ellis. The Posting of the Colors was done by the four-man color guard from the Padre Kino 4th Degree Assembly, Knights of Columbus, Green Valley. Chairman Ellis led the Pledge of Allegiance.

Members Present

Advisory Commission Members

Webb Ellis, Chairperson
Tom Dingwall, Vice-Chair
Joe Bibich
Gary Fredricks
Linda Fulkerson
Tom Heaney
Phillip Quochoytewa
Kenneth Yamanouchi

Arizona Department of Veterans' Services

Lee Borgen, ADVS Vets' Benefit Counselor

Introductions: Chairman Ellis welcomed the approximately 50 guests and thanked them for coming. He expressed the Commission's appreciation to the Church staff and the Color Guard for their roles in hosting the meeting. He gave a brief explanation of the makeup and purpose of the Commission and why the Commission was in Green Valley. The Commissioners introduced themselves. Chairman Ellis introduced Lee Borgen, Arizona Department of Veterans' Service Veterans Benefit Counselor and State Women Veterans Coordinator. Commission Heaney introduced Harry Lyons, President of the Southern Region of the Fleet Reserve Association.

Recognized Guests – Senator Tom Bee, President, AZ Senate; Representative Marian McClure, AZ House of Representatives; Ray Carroll, Pima County Supervisor; Shay Saucedo, representing Congresswoman Giffords; Pepe Mendoza, Public Affairs Officer -SAVAHCS (Southern Arizona Veterans Administration Health Care System); Connie Putz, VA CBOC (Community-Based Outpatient Clinic) Manager, SAVAHCs; Debra Lown, New Patient Coordinator, SAVAHCs; Bob DiGirolamo, Commander, DAV Department of Arizona; and C. Martin Stevens, Local Veterans' Employment Representative - DES and Chairman, Tucson Veterans Affairs Committee.

Mr. Mendoza showed a video of NBC Nightly News, 3/15/06, that highlighted VA Health Care in America. The VA Health Care System is a model for the private sector. Based upon patient satisfaction surveys, the system provides the best health care in the country. VA also has the largest and most modern electronic record keeping system in the world.

Approval of Minutes – The minutes of the December 14, 2006 meeting were approved subject to minor corrections. The minutes of the special teleconference meeting on January 3, 2007 were approved subject to minor corrections.

Legislative Update – Chairman Ellis reported the following:

- 60 VBC's (Veterans Benefits Counselors) are needed. Before the last legislative session we had only 18, when we received an additional 21. VA recommends a minimum of one VBC per 10,000 veterans, preferably one per 5,000. Arizona now has one per 15,000. The Governor supports the additional 19 VBC's to meet the VA minimum and we will work hard with the legislature to achieve those. At Chairman Ellis' request, VBC Lee Borgen explained the duties and responsibilities of the VBC.
- Federal funding for a second State Veterans' Home in Tucson was not provided in the VA's FY 2007 budget. This was not unexpected, and hopefully will be remedied in the FY 2008 budget. Arizona's 35% share of the cost to build the facility, \$10M, was appropriated during the last legislative session.
- The Freedom License Plate went on sale last Tuesday for the customary \$25 for specialized plates. Of the \$25, \$17 goes to the Veterans' Donation Fund. This plate is available to anyone registering a vehicle in Arizona. Lee Borgen noted that the plate is to show support for our military personnel. It has nothing to do with politics.
- The Arizona Veterans Registration Form will allow the Department to keep Arizona's veterans informed of important issues. Chairman Ellis assured the attendees that the information on the forms is for the Department's use only and will not be sold or given to anyone else. He urged all attendees to take some forms, fill them out and pass them out to other veterans, then mail them to the address shown on the bottom.

Strategic Plan Overview – Chairman Ellis explained the region setup and introduced Commissioners Dingwall and Heaney. He thanked both for their efforts in setting up the Green Valley meeting. The meeting was then opened to the floor.

Open Discussion / For the Good of the Order

- Representative McClure announced that she was instrumental in achieving a reduction in the cost of a personalized AZ veteran's plate. It used to cost \$50 per year. It now costs \$50 for the initial issue only and \$25 per year for each renewal. Chairman Ellis thanked her and initiated a round of applause to express appreciation for Representative McClure's efforts.
- Commissioner Dingwall provided the address and phone number for the Tucson and Sierra Vista offices and Mr. Mendoza announced that Greg Bell is the VBC at the Tucson VA Medical Center. Counselors also are available from the American Legion, VFW, MOPH and AMVETS.
- One attendee asked why Category 8 retirees were cut off from VA Health Care. Mr. Mendoza replied that Public Law 104-262, October 1996) changed the priorities of health care to include all categories 1 through 8. However, VA Secretary was forced to cut back on treatment of new categories 7 and 8 due to fiscal constraints. Inclusion of categories 7 and 8 will come only if legislators provide sufficient funding. Commissioner Dingwall urged all attendees to contact their Veteran Service Organizations (VSO) and urge them to pressure their Congressional Senators and Representatives for relief from the category restriction.
- A member of the color guard announced the willingness of the Knights of Columbus to assist veterans through myriad activities, and a similar offer was made on behalf of the American Legion although the local news media needs to do a better job publicizing these offers of assistance.
- Martin Stevens reminded everyone that DES has veterans' representatives to help veterans in their local office. The phone number is 520-293-1919, ext. 4143.
- Carlos Contreras, President of the Atomic Veterans of America, announced that they have a new 501(c)(3) organization. There are 175,000 veterans still alive who were exposed to ionizing radiation and who need help with VA claims.

- Mr. Mendoza announced that Tucson has two new CBOCs coming on line this year. A new mental health clinic on the west side of the Tucson VA Medical Center compound will open in August 2008.
- Commissioner Bibich reminded everyone to urge their members of Congress to support the 65% federal VA funding for the State veteran home in Tucson.
- Commissioner Yamanouchi provided information on the connection between military training and civilian education. He emphasized that former active duty personnel often get 15 to 55 credit hours for their military training that could be applied towards a degree if they only knew about it. Newly discharged veterans should be encouraged to take advantage of the available credit for their active duty studies.
- Marie Tsasures, Secretary of the Tucson Chapter of Gold Star Wives, added widows of active duty and 100% service connected veterans should file for DIC (Dependency and Indemnity Compensation) and also take advantage of their survivor education benefits. She got her Masters Degree on the GI Bill. Gold Star Wives need to know that DIC includes education benefits.
- Chairman Ellis thanked both Commissioner Yamanouchi and Ms Tsasures for their observations. He added that many veterans do not realize that they are veterans if they didn't serve in combat. Combat duty is not a prerequisite to being classified as a veteran. He also cited the ongoing Commission displeasure with the way the VA handles its education counseling of veterans. A recent letter from the Commission urging Congressional hearings into the subject is included with the meeting minutes that were a handout for the attendees.
- One attendee questioned why the VA doesn't provide preventive care unless the veteran requests it. Mr. Mendoza acknowledged that Tucson's telecare is not working well. They are going back to letting the veteran talk directly to the VA provider. Appointment notification is being changed to a postcard format for appointment date and time. New systems will be proactive for the veteran. Everyone in the VAMC database will receive a letter notifying them of the new procedures. The Tucson Patient Coordinator will try to contact any patient who has not been seen for 24 months, to see what they need and get them active again in the system. Tucson had 518,000 outpatient visits last year and 9,000 inpatient stays. Those are through the door counts and not necessarily different individuals using the system. Several attendees were highly complimentary of the Tucson VA Medical Center service to its veterans.
- One attendee sought support for a bill currently before the legislature that would provide state tax exemption for military retired pay. Representative McClure indicated that, since she is a beneficiary, she could not vote on the bill. Senator Bee indicated that full exemption was not likely, that he would prefer a graduated exemption. He assured the attendees of his continued support of veterans.
- Chairman Ellis expressed the Commission's appreciation for the strong support for veterans' issues by the legislature during the last session.
- Chairman Ellis noted that this was the shortest "exported" meeting so far and that it appears that there are no issues or complaints in the Green Valley area that need the Commission's attention. Tucson VA and other organizations in the area do a lot of outreach in the area so veterans' needs are being addressed more effectively than in other areas of the state.

Adjournment – Chairman Ellis thanked everyone for their attendance and participation. The meeting adjourned at 11:40 a.m.